

PLOT OF UNION PRISONERS TO CAPTURE THE CONFEDERATE CAPITAL

General di Cesnola, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Describes the Daring Scheme by Which the Escape of the Federal Prisoners in Libby Was to Be Effected and By Which They Were to Co-operate With General Fitzpatrick's Forces and End the War

ON examining some dusty civil war records a few days ago Gen. Louis Palma Di Cesnola happened across the name of Lieutenant Colonel —, who was a fellow prisoner with him in Libby Prison in 1864, and but for whose suspected betrayal of certain plans of some magnitude himself and others would have liberated themselves and captured the Confederate capital with the co-operation of 18,000 non-commissioned officers and men at Belle Isle, and a regiment of cavalry under General Kilpatrick on the outside.

Seeing the name of this suspected traitor brought afresh to his mind the Libby episode, and has resurrected many details of the affair which had almost passed from his memory. Had it not been for him—of this General Di Cesnola is firmly convinced—they would have been able to escape from Libby and to have liberated the prisoners on Belle Isle and captured Richmond, which was guarded at the time by an army of mere boys.

Traitor Driven Abroad.

Colonel — was suspected by the officers in Libby of having betrayed the plans, and but for the intervention of a fellow officer, who advised getting proof positive of his guilt before taking summary action, would have been thrown from a third story window on the night the escape was frustrated. He subsequently obtained his liberty, but was never received back into the Northern army. Either his conscience or the humiliation of being avoided by his old comrades in arms afterward drove him to take up his residence in London, where he prospered as the manager of the Hotel Langham.

Capture of General Di Cesnola.

This hostility was for years following the war a favorite meeting place of prominent Southern sympathizers who happened to be abroad. He always shunned his former war comrades. On one or two occasions they declined to shake hands with him in his own hotel. He is now dead.

Returning to the events which led up to the cul de sac by which plans to capture Richmond were frustrated and to the personal role General Cesnola played in the affair: He entered the service of the United States in October, 1861, and was captured in Virginia in June, 1862, at the cavalry engagement at Aldie. He was marched mostly on foot more than a hundred miles to Staunton, and then by railroad to the Confederate capital and confined in Libby Prison. He arrived in Richmond late one afternoon and remained imprisoned in the tobacco factory until March, 1864.

Roughly Handled.

On his arrival in Libby he was summoned before Commandant Thomas P. Turner and thence into a spacious dark hall, in a corner of which a Confederate sergeant searched him through from head to foot, in the roughest manner possible. Of course, he took from him everything he had and was angry because he could not find any greenbacks on his person. He asked General Di Cesnola what he had done with his money and if he had a watch. Di Cesnola told him that a chivalric Southerner had stolen his watch and money during the march from Middleburg to Staunton. He began to abuse him, using profane language and denying his veracity. Di Cesnola explained to him that perhaps the gentleman only intended to borrow those articles. So he was made a prisoner and stripped of everything except his spurs, which, being screwed into the boots, could not be removed.

In the Commissary.

Di Cesnola remained in this deplorable condition, without a book to read or a sheet of paper on which to write, for over five months, nursing his feelings during the days, using his boots for a pillow during the nights, and sleeping on the plank floor with neither blanket nor overcoat. Dogs had certainly better sleeping accommodations than the men had in Libby. His cellmates were Gen. Neal Dow and Col. Charles G. Davis, of the First Massachusetts Cavalry.

In November, 1863, Di Cesnola was

called before Major Turner and told that he was selected to supersede General Dow as commissary of distribution. Major Turner intimated that he would not be permitted to hold any conversation with the men in Belle Isle, nor carry any verbal or written communication to the Confederate officer in command of the island.

Getting the Lay of the Land.

This commissary office gave him an opportunity to study the lay of the land and fortifications, and to communicate with the men in Belle Isle. He was permitted to visit Belle Isle at 10 o'clock every morning, and remain there until late in the afternoon, before being brought back for another night in Libby. Federal provisions, in boxes, were stored in a warehouse some hundred yards from the prison proper, and these boxes were indiscriminately broken open by the guards and pilfered. Di Cesnola came to the conclusion, after visiting the warehouse several times, as he found ragged Confederate uniforms left here and there in corners of the warehouse, that the guards were in the habit of making hasty toilet there.

It was by means of these uniforms that



COL. W. L. WATSON.

many of the 109 Union officers were enabled to escape from Libby after the famous tunneling. Di Cesnola had the scurvy and could not join the party. The next morning he chatted with some of the sentinels and laughed at their great vigilance during the previous night. They said they had seen men coming out from the yard of the warehouse and running as fast as they could, but they supposed it was some of their own guard making a raid on the boxes.

A Miniature Arsenal.

Some time prior to this Di Cesnola had formulated his plan to escape from Libby Prison and capture Richmond. The plan was entirely feasible because of his knowledge of the defenses and the surety of arms and ammunition being smuggled into the prison. One of his main hopes was Father Bixio, a Jesuit priest and brother of General Bixio, who served in the Italian army under Garibaldi. By one way or another they managed to get quite an assortment of small arms and knives into the prison.

Secretary Stanton had blasted their hopes of being exchanged by his order that no more exchanges would be made. He did this under the belief that the Confederates needed more men than did the Northern army, and would be permanently crippled without an exchange of prisoners. This was the germ from which the conspiracy sprang. But how was the plan to be executed?

Communicating With Washington.

Di Cesnola had been permitted to communicate with his family in New York by means of letters sent through the blockade runners. Of course, these letters were always scrutinized by the



GENERAL LOUIS PALMA DI CESNOLA

GENERAL LOUIS PALMA DI CESNOLA, FATHER OF THE LIBERATION CONSPIRACY

General Louis Palma Di Cesnola, managing director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has related the following startling revelation of his conspiracy—barely mentioned in official histories and never fully told—to escape from Libby Prison with 900 Federal officers, and by co-operating with 18,000 non-commissioned officers and men whom they were to release from Belle Isle, in the James River, to capture Richmond and end the civil war a year before Appomattox. General Di Cesnola in person conceived and laid these plans, which are of greater magnitude than any prison escape recorded in the annals of modern warfare. He never before has made the facts public, and is the only man living who is able to tell the true story of the daring conspiracy.

General Di Cesnola is a Sardinian of noble family, and came to this country just prior to the breaking out of the rebellion. Having had experience in the Crimean war, he was made colonel of the Fourth New York Cavalry in 1862, and was wounded and captured at the battle of Aldie. He spent ten months in the famous Libby Prison in Richmond.

While there he conceived and would have executed an escape without a parallel in history but for the betrayal of the plans by a fellow prisoner, who came near paying for his act with his life. This prisoner has been surrounded by mystery, and his name has never appeared in history. His conscience afterward drove him from his native land and he died in London—a man without a country. Out of regard for the family General Di Cesnola refrains from giving his name.

Had not their scheme been frustrated General Di Cesnola and his fellow conspirators undoubtedly would have captured Richmond—with the aid of General Fitzpatrick and 10,000 cavalrymen on the outside—and beyond peradventure would have hastened the end of the war.

General Di Cesnola, Capt. Francis Irsh, former Congressman Charles Morgan of Missouri, and a small handful of civil war veterans are the sole survivors of the Libby Prison plot.

GENERAL DI CESNOLA'S STATEMENT.

The accompanying article, which I have carefully gone over, is correct.

L. P. Di Cesnola

prison officials, and nothing of a suspicious nature was permitted to pass. He had succeeded in sending several letters through, when it occurred to him to communicate with his old friend, Dr. Verdi, physician to President Lincoln, and Secretary Seward, in Washington.

It was important that this letter should in no way arouse the suspicions of the Libby guards, and yet at the same time should contain an appeal for assistance. So he conceived the idea of its double meaning could be brought to

light by simply folding the corners in eight different directions. On the surface of writing the letter in such a way that face the letter was a request for Dr. Verdi to write Mrs. Di Cesnola in New York about clothing, linen, repairs, laundry, and wearing apparel in general, of which her husband was in great need. Perhaps the following recital will throw more light on the Washington end of the affair than it would be possible otherwise. It is an account sent General Di Cesnola:

One afternoon in February, 1864, a letter was left at my house by some person to me unknown. I read it. It proved to be a letter from you (Cesnola), requesting me to write your wife about certain personal matters. I was surprised at the request and on pondering over the letter found its construction rather peculiar. As I was very busy at the time I did not attend to the request. On the next day another letter came. It contained no writing, but was simply a large sheet with holes and



COLONEL DI CESNOLA AND COLONEL CHARLES G. DAVIS, OF THE FIRST MASSACHUSETTS CAVALRY, IN THEIR QUARTERS, LIBBY PRISON.

Fac-simile reproduction of a drawing made at the time by one of the prisoners.

Languishing in the Foul Jail, Dying, Fighting Death and Disease, Union Soldiers Decided Upon a Deperate Enterprise Designed Alike to Secure Their Liberty and Conspicuously Serve Their Country—How They Were Betrayed By One of Their Number—Story Told For the First Time

slits of different sizes and lengths at irregular distances. Surely the thing was becoming rather mysterious, and I grew more and more curious. The more I thought over the circumstance the more suspicious I became. Treason was the order of the day and espionage was in full blast at the capital. Was this a trick, a trap, or what? Was I suspected of disloyalty, although the trusted friend of General McClellan and of five members of the Cabinet?

As the day wore on an idea struck me which should have occurred to me before, and that was to see what relation the sheets bore to one another. I spread them out before me and by folding them over, lo, and behold—a plan for the escape of 19,000 Federal prisoners from Libby and Belle Isle.

Not only that, but a plan for the taking of Richmond by the same prisoners, the capture of President Davis, his cabinet, and many other important persons who were to be held as hostage. My brain whirled on reading the plan of this daring attempt.

I was all excitement the remainder of the day, and in the evening went to see Postmaster General Blair. He had been

the Hampton Legion—about 10,000 men. On the inside it was guarded by some thousand or two of boys. The inner fortifications were only partially manned. General Grant was preparing for his final campaign, and General Lee needed every available man. Secretary Stanton had announced that no exchange of prisoners would be permitted, as it would add materially to the strength of the Confederate army. Thus the Union prisoners were practically left to their fate.

This was a hazardous undertaking, as, according to international laws of war, a prisoner who sheds blood in attempting to escape is doomed to death in case of failure. Among my co-conspirators were Captain Morley, one of the famous Six Hundred of Balaklava in the Crimean war, who wore the Victoria cross, and Capt. Francis Irsh, of the Forty-fifth New York Volunteers, to whom was given the medal of honor for distinguished gallantry at Gettysburg. All were sworn to secrecy in the proposed overpowering of the guards and seizing of arms.

Guards to Be Overpowered.

The plan for doing this was to be put in operation during a minstrel performance in the prison. Several of the Federal officers were excellent mimics, and by charring their faces made very good imitation negroes. The guards were in the habit of attending the performances in scores. It was schemed to get them absorbed in the entertainment and then overpower them. This would enable a large number of prisoners to dress in Federal uniforms and to arm themselves with rifles. They then planned to overpower the guards, proceed to the tobacco warehouse, and secure a hundred or more castoff uniforms left there by the Confederate soldiers in looting.

One party was to march to the river and by overpowering the guards secure the boats and proceed to Belle Isle and liberate the 18,000 Union men there. Another party was to seize the arsenal and secure arms for the liberated prisoners, while a third was to seize the capitol and Confederate congress, then in session in Richmond.

Night after night the minstrel show was given, and night after night no word came from Washington. They were hoping against hope. Already more than a hundred prisoners had escaped through the tunnel constructed under the direction of Colonel Rose, and the garrison was vigilant. Not hearing from Washington, the prisoners determined to make the attempt without outside aid. It was a last resort. They were prepared to sell their lives at a dear price. Hundreds of the men were dying slow and tortuous deaths in the foul prison dungeons. It was better to be shot than to die in such a manner. It was all arranged on a February day, that they should make the dash for liberty on the following night. Then came the cul de sac.

Betrayal and Failure.

Di Cesnola arose the next morning, and on glancing out of the window saw several battalions of extra guards marching into the prison yard. At each corner of the building was stationed a field gun and ammunition. Some one had given the plot away. Who had betrayed them? At first it was thought a Confederate spy had been put among them disguised as a Union officer. All that day was spent in trying to ferret out the traitor, if traitor there was. During the afternoon Major Turner appeared among the prisoners and began his sardonic examination.

The Federal officers noticed that Colonel — was absent from the room. After Major Turner had retired this Colonel — appeared. He was questioned by some of the men, and did not give satisfactory answers. During the night it was arranged by several of the prisoners to throw Colonel — from a third-story window in the prison. Di Cesnola was not a party to the scheme, but heard all about it. One or two of the cooler heads interested for Colonel — by appealing to the men to postpone his death until absolute proof of his guilt could be adduced. This saved his life, as they were never able to secure or bring forward enough proof to warrant killing him. Thus failed a coup d'etat which promised everything for nothing. Had Secretary Stanton co-operated with the Libby prisoners immediately on receipt of the information he received there is hardly a doubt but that they would have captured Richmond and ended the war a year before the final surrender at Appomattox in April, 1865.

The Fluctuations of Confederate Currency

WHEN Confederate money was first issued it commanded a small premium. It was received freely by the people because of their faith in its value, and further because according to preference indicated their loyalty to the Confederate government.

The price of all the commodities of life rose as rapidly as the purchasing power of the Confederate money fell. The withdrawal of thousands from agricultural pursuits, the closing of foreign markets of supply, and other causes created a shortage in food supplies. It was with great difficulty that adequate provision could be made for the support of the troops in the field.

Without discussing the causes which

led to an early depreciation of Confederate currency, a table is presented of its fluctuations. Taking gold as a standard, a Confederate paper dollar was worth as follows, at the different dates indicated:

| | Cents. |
|---------------------|--------|
| Dec. 1, 1861..... | 80 |
| Dec. 15, 1861..... | 75 |
| Feb. 1, 1862..... | 60 |
| Feb. 1, 1863..... | 20 |
| June, 1863..... | 8 |
| November, 1864..... | 4 1/2 |
| January, 1865..... | 2 1/2 |
| April 1, 1865..... | 1 1/2 |

After that date it took from \$800 to \$1,000 in Confederate money, up to the time of the Appomattox surrender, to buy a gold dollar or a \$1 greenback bill.

Soldier Thought That General Hood Was Lost

ON HOOD'S march into Tennessee, some Texans saw him a few days after the battle of Atlanta sitting on a log by the roadside intently examining a map.

"Umph!" grunted one of the Texans. "That's just what I expected; the darned cuss is lost—that's what's the matter with him, and he's sarchin' that map so as to find his way to grub."

That evening orders were issued directing the barefooted of Hood's army to report next morning at a certain place for the purpose of being fitted with moccasins. These, it was understood, were to be made of portions of green cowhide, securely fastened around the feet

with thongs of the same material, the theory, as well as the result being that as the hide dried it accommodated itself to the shape of the wearer's feet, and, although not elegant, became quite comfortable footwear. The same fellow who imagined that Hood was lost happened to be barefooted himself, and he accepted the order as a confirmation of his suspicions, saying:

"Didn't I tell you the general war lost, boys? This order proves it sarchin' around and verbatimly. He's havin' us feller shod that-a-way soes ole Sherman won't now which way we are goin'. Them ole mockersins 'll have neither toe, heel, or instep to 'em, an' 'll jest pint everywhere."